9 Story of American Trappers in Utah

Rocky Mountain Fur Company

"Now, class, we will tell the story of the mountain men who made more explorations and trapped more beaver in Utah than did any other group. They were Americans working for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company. This company was organized by General William Henry Ashley and Major Andrew Henry in the spring of 1822. Its headquarters were at St. Louis, Missouri.

"Ashley and Henry enlisted in their first group of trappers 100 young men, many of whom became the most famous explorers of Utah. The names of Jedediah S. Smith, James Bridger, Etienne Provot, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Ashley, Henry, Jackson, the Sublette brothers, and many others should become familiar to every school child and adult in Utah and in the Rocky Mountain area. They were the explorers and pathfinders of this vast western area. They went into every nook of this unknown land, trapped on every stream and lake, and found every fertile valley and mountain pass," Mr. Madsen explained.

Discovery of South Pass, February, 1824

"From 1822 to 1824 the Ashley-Henry employees trapped in the Yellowstone Park region, meeting several disastrous reverses, such as Indian attacks. But an event occurred in February, 1824, which led almost immediately to American control of the Rocky Mountain beaver trade and to the exploration of Utah and the rest of the country lying between the Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Coast. This event was the discovery of the famous South Pass by some of the Ashley-Henry trappers under the leadership of Jedediah S. Smith and Thomas Fitzpatrick."

Elizabeth asked, "But how could the discovery of a low pass through the mountains cause Americans to explore Utah and westward, and result in the United States' finally owning that territory?"

"Well, Elizabeth, before the discovery of South Pass, it was impossible to get wagons over the high mountains. With its discovery the South Pass supplied the only practicable wagon route through the Rocky Mountains. Over this route the immigrants traveled who saved Oregon for America, who settled California, and who colonized Utah. Thus it had a far-reaching effect upon the future American ownership of Utah and the country westward to the Pacific Ocean."

American trappers enter Utah

"And now," Mr. Madsen remarked, "we shall turn our attention again to the mountain men.

"In the spring of 1824 the Ashley-Henry trappers moved down from the Yellowstone Park region to the Green River area in Wyoming. Here they had unusual success. That fall they divided themselves into three groups and agreed that they would assemble later on the Bear River.

"One of these groups was under Etienne Provot. He and his companions followed Black's Fork from Green River to its headwaters, trapping as they ascended the stream. Then they made some more or less extensive explorations to the headwaters of the Provo, Weber, and Bear rivers in the Granddaddy Lakes country of the Uintah Mountains. When the cold weather froze the streams in the mountains, Provot and his party came down the Weber River

—Milton R Hunter

Photo — courtesy U.S. Forest Service

Beaver caught in one Utah stream to plant in another stream

to the Great Salt Lake. They made their camp near the junction of the Ogden and Weber rivers, at the present site of Ogden City.

"It was during the time of this encampment that the entire party narrowly escaped being killed by the Indians. The event took place around a peace-fire parley where Provot and his men, in company with the Indians, were smoking the Calumet (pipe of peace of the North American Indians).

"Mauvaise Gauche, a Snake-Ute Indian, arose and said, 'The spirits don't like the presence of iron at this ceremony'; and then he took the knives and guns of the trappers and the tomahawks of the Indians and placed them to one side. When Provot and his men were unarmed, Gauche gave the signal. Immediately the red men drew knives which they had hidden beneath their blankets and made a savage attack upon the whites. Seventeen of the trappers were killed."

"Did Provot, the leader of the trappers, get killed?" John asked.

"No," the teacher answered. "Provot, as a result of his cool courage and great strength, escaped with four of his men to the mountains. He and his companions made their way northward. In the spring of 1825, they joined Ashley's other mountain men in Cache Valley, northern Utah.

"Perhaps you have wondered, class, from where the name Provo came. Provo City,. Provo Canyon, and Provo River were all named in honor of the explorer and trapper – Etienne Provot.

"Now, as to the other two companies," Mr. Madsen remarked, "the second company to leave the Green River in the fall of 1824 was led by Jedediah S. Smith. His small company of six men went northward through the Jackson Hole country of Wyoming and then northwestward. They came in contact with Peter Skene Ogden of the Hudson's Bay Company on his Snake River expedition. In the spring of 1825, Smith and his mountain men joined the other Ashley-Henry trappers in northern Utah.

"The third and largest party, under William L. Sublette, trapped along the Bear River to Cache Valley, Utah. When they first arrived, they named that district Willow Valley. But after it became a favorite place for hiding or caching their furs, the name was changed to Cache Valley."

"How did the trappers hide or cache their furs?" Michael inquired.

"Well, Michael, they dug a hole in the south side of the hill upon which the Utah State University now stands. After they put their furs in the excavation, they filled its mouth with dirt and made the spot appear as natural as possible so no one would find their furs," he replied.

Discovery of Great Salt Lake, 1824

'One evening while the trappers sat around their campfire in Cache Valley in the fall of 1824, William L. Sublette asked, 'What do you think is the course of the Bear River and where do you think it empties?'

"One trapper remarked, 'Perhaps northward and joins the Snake River.'

"James Bridger replied, 'I'm sure it doesn't. I've been to a place where it turns south.'

"The discussion continued, each mountain man giving his opinion. Finally Sublette said, 'Jim, it appears as if most of us disagree with you. Why not find out?'

" 'How?' Bridger asked.

" 'Make a boat and sail down the river to its mouth,' Sublette replied.

" 'I'll bet ten of my best beaver skins that I'm right,' Jim responded.

" 'We'll take your wager, Jim,' the other replied, 'but you'll have to prove it.'

" 'It's agreed,' said Bridger; and so, in a small bullboat of hide built for the occasion, James Bridger traveled alone down the Bear River.

"After passing through the canyon leading from Cache Valley, he secured his boat to a shrub on the bank near the edge of the stream. Climbing on the southern rim of the canyon, he saw the present Bear River Valley. Also, in the distance, some 25 miles to the south, he got a view of a large body of water.

"Returning to his boat, he floated downstream to where the river flowed into the Great Salt Lake. After examining its waters, he returned to Sublette's camp in Cache Valley and reported, 'The Bear River flows into an arm of the Pacific Ocean. I tasted the water and found it to be very salty. It is surely ocean water.'

"Jim Bridger won his bet; and the trappers were agreed that the Bear River flowed into the Pacific Ocean."

"Did any of the other trappers see the Great Salt Lake?"

"Yes, Stephen," the teacher replied. "At various times during the winter of 1824-25, other mountain men gazed upon Utah's inland sea and tasted its salt waters. Provot and his men saw the Great Salt Lake soon after Bridger saw it. Ogden and his trappers also saw it. In fact, the mountain men soon became thoroughly acquainted with it.

"But the fact that Bridger made his way down the Bear River in a boat, which would necessarily have been before the stream froze over in the fall, is proof that Bridger reached the shores of the Great Salt Lake before Provot did and before any of the other mountain men.

"After weighing all available evidences, it seems definite that James Bridger was the first white man to see Utah's inland sea, and so history affirms that he was the discoverer of the Great Salt Lake," Mr. Madsen concluded.

Mountain Men in Utah, 1824-1825

"Well, to continue with the story of the mountain men in Utah," the teacher remarked, "after Jim Bridger returned to Sublette's camp, the group continued trapping to their sources the streams that flow into Cache Valley. The trappers finally settled into winter quarters, probably in some such sheltered place as the mouth of Logan Canyon or Blacksmith's Fork where food could be found for their animals.

"When the spring of 1825 came, all the employees of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, including Smith's and Provot's parties, trapped on the Wasatch streams at least as far south as Utah Valley. And they gained from the Indians some knowledge of Utah farther south, including the existence of Sevier Lake and its location.

"While trapping on the Weber River in May, the 29 Hudson's Bay employees (previously mentioned) joined the American trappers and two months later sold their furs to Ashley.

"In June when the mountain men were in Utah Valley, they received word through a courier to assemble with their furs for the purpose of meeting General Ashley, who was at that time making his way across Utah."

Jim Bridger

General Ashley visits Utah, 1825

"I have been wondering, sir, just when and how the trappers sold their beaver furs," John Brown remarked.

"Yes," Mr. Madsen answered, "I must tell you about that part of the life of the mountain men. Of course their complete purpose in being here was to make money from furs. You recall, the trappers were working for the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, and so it was the company's duty to pay the trappers for their furs and furnish them supplies.

"For these purposes William H. Ashley came to Utah in 1825. He left

St. Louis in November, 1824. His pack horses were loaded with things the trappers needed; and he brought with him plenty of pack horses to carry the peltries back to St. Louis.

"General Ashley's trip is of unusual importance, because he came along a new pathway from the Missouri River westward, over which the overland trail and the Mormon emigrants later followed. He came westward by way of the North Platte River, the Sweetwater, South Pass, and then southwestward to the Green River region. Ashley brought with him a small cannon, 'the first wheeled vehicle to cross South Pass.'

"On April 30, 1825, the General reached Henry's Fork on the Utah-Wyoming boundary. This was considered by Ashley to be a good place to hold a general trading rendezvous. He divided his followers into three groups and told them to explore, to gather furs, and to inform Indians and free trappers of the rendezvous that was to be held at that place on July 1.

"Then all the merchandise that had been brought to supply the employees of the Rocky Mountain Fur Company was left there in a cache; and Ashley and his trappers set sail on the harmless looking Green River in boats made from buffalo hides.

"You will be interested to know, class, that beginning near Manila, Utah, they descended the treacherous river from Flaming Gorge to the plain below Split Mountain just above Jensen, Utah. They had a series of adventures which made ordinary Indian fighting seem like pastime. Evidence remains of this daring trip. The General painted his name and the date, 'ASHLEY—1825,' in large characters on the rock wall at the entrance of Red Canyon. Nearly 45 years later, this inscription was discovered by Major Powell and his party when they were exploring the Colorado River.

"After Ashley and his comrades left the Green River, they did some trapping while crossing the Uintah Mountains to the merchandise cache at Henry's Fork. This was the appointed place for the rendezvous (ron-de-voo)."

A trappers' rendezvous, 1825

Tom inquired, "You said, Mr. Madsen, that Ashley had sent word for the mountain men to assemble at a trappers' rendezvous. What does that big word mean?"

"Rendezvous is a French word used in trapper days which meant a gathering at a certain place at an appointed time for a meeting," the teacher replied.

Courtesy Wheelwright Lithographing Co.

Statue of General Ashley and trappers on "This is the Place Monument"